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‘The Doldrummers’ : A Tale of Constant Struggle to Exist

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“Man is nothing else but what he proposes, exists only in so far as he realizes himself; he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is”. (p. 41)

Abstract- Modern man does not believe in God, he thinks himself to be an incarnation, and a self assumed Man God who takes his own resolutions, decisions and carves his figure by his own hands, he is the past behind his present image, he is the creator as well as the destroyer of the self, this is somewhat true about the play The Doldrummers, a nonconforming play by Asif Currimbhoy. It has four young people who live a carefree life with no purpose and meaning, but they are much responsible for their future, the story heads to future with a constant struggle of the characters to add some meaning into their lives to get a better hold of their future but in the process, they lose whatever they once possessed and felt lucky about. In the present study I will be analyzing these four central characters from existential point of view, emphasizing the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent, determining their own development through acts of the will. (Lexico Oxford Dictionary). I will also be analyzing their futile attempts to add meaning into their lives, subsequent ‘angst’ or ‘anguish’ that arose because of their unsuccessful endeavors and the consequences of this anguish on their **lives**.

Keywords- Angst, anguish, existentialism, alienation, responsibility.

Existentialism in a nut-shell-Existentialism is an idea or philosophy which emphasizes on the making of man; by his own choices, it holds man responsible for what he makes of himself which is also called the essence of man. As a theory it holds man as a free being or a free person who is left in this world without any guidance or guide or God, but this individual has cognitive skills and is intelligent enough to make choices in life, life as a constant process offers numerous choices to lead the life and he has to necessarily make choices, as he cannot

escape making those choices, the choices a man makes construct his being which is called 'essence'. Macquarrie describes 'essence' as "the essence of an object is constituted by those basic characteristic that make it one kind of object rather than another" (p. 41) he further says "if the existence of anything has to do with the fact 'that it is', its essence consists in 'what it is'. (p. 41)

Existentialism flourished in Europe after World War II when mankind was confused as well as regretful over the loss the war caused. The word was coined by Gabriel Marcel in 1943 for discussing the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre. Although Sartre never fully associated himself with this movement, his works echo existential traits. As per Sartre "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards". (p. 28) In other words existentialism as a philosophy focuses on man and describes him to be free to make choices and subsequently he is fully responsible for the consequences he has to face afterwards. Existential philosophers say that a man makes choices according to his free will hence he is the creator of the 'essence' of his 'existence'.

Existentialists believe in the absence of God and presume man to be abandoned in this world, without any God or guide man has to choose his own way of living that are called 'choices', it does not consider man as a pre-planned idea or thing which is made as his creator wanted to make, "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself"(p. 29), it considers man to be different from that of chair, table and any non-living thing which gains its shape according to its master's idea or wish, man is not born with an idea or plan, he is an individual who owns the right and necessity of his creation and he is the maker of his 'essence'. It depends totally on the man to be a good person or bad, to choose a good path or bad, to lead a life of good or of bad.

Existentialism does not believe in any drive force, while decision making man is a free being and he individually makes his choices. Sartre does not regard this freedom a 'boon' but a 'curse' he says "we are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free". (p. 34) It also believes that life is absurd, and contains hidden challenges that fall upon man, these challenges fall as freely as anything, it believes there is no factor like good deeds, prayers, charity which can save man from these challenges, irrespective of anything they fall and man has to deal with them. It is a man's job to give meaning to his life.

Man is considered to be in the center, his life and different choices to lead one's life are revolving around him, existentialists say that because he is abandoned in this vast world, because he is isolated, he has many options in terms of choices; being responsible he has to make choices not only for himself but for the whole humanity, as Sartre says "resignation in my will for everyone, and my action is, in consequence, a commitment on behalf of all mankind". (p. 30) One man represents the entire humanity and the burden of responsibility is very high he cannot refrain himself from making those choices he has to make a move because he represents humanity in this connection Sartre gives the example of monogamy by following this system one represents himself as an example of the behavior which is desired from man in general, and the man following monogamy represents the mankind and our responsibility towards it. As Sartre says "In fashioning Myself I fashion Man". (p.30) This burden of responsibility, this burden of making choices, making decisions and not getting desired consequences create

‘angst’ or ‘anguish’, or ‘anxiety’ and he has to bear it all alone for the sake of humanity; “when a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind- in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility”. (Sartre p.30)

Existentialists also believe in the prevalence of nothingness that before death and after death its only nothingness that prevails, when man did not even exist nothingness was there and when he will cease to exist only nothingness will exist, man always struggles to bring some meaning into life, just to find out that there is only ‘nothingness’ he gets in the end; all his efforts come to prove meaningless and fruitless; that is what proves the absurdity of human life. Man as a being resides in nothingness (starts from nothingness and ends in nothingness) all he does leads him to nothingness; he starts from nothing and ends as nothing. But Kierkegaard suggests when we understand the ultimate absurdity of life it becomes more meaningful and death is the proof that life is meaningless.

Life is long pursuit of identity and meaning with social, economical and psychological pressures on man, he is responsible for all the men, he has a constant burden on his shoulders of this conformity, he is free to make choices but chained in responsibility, that is where the crisis arises, when man does not feel like fitting into the society around him, when he does not feel happy with the choices he made to lead life and he is not happy with the identity he created. Existentialism states that life is absurd and man is a free being who is condemned to live in alienation, although a free being; he is destined to make some choices that are necessary because he represents humanity and he is a moral and social person he has to take his social responsibilities, the anguish arises when he is not happy with his choices and the ‘essence’ of his being; he feels the guilt and the crisis begins, which causes ‘alienation’; he has to bear the guilt of his making, he works all through his life to add some meaning into life but all he gets ‘nothingness’ and the knowledge that ‘life is absurd’ and ‘meaningless’. Man ‘exists’ just to achieve this ultimate ‘nothingness’ in the end and existentialists try to study the constant struggle of an individual to the ultimate knowledge about the meaninglessness of life.

The Doldrums is a story of four disoriented youths living in the suburbs of Bombay, they live in a meaningless society without any purpose in life, Tony and Joe compose and sing filthy inarticulate absurd songs and kill their time, all the time they are boozing on ‘Bathroom gin’ and talking foolishly, babbling and quarreling. Liza is a sex worker, her speech and dialogues are double meaning and immoral, all she wants is to enter the main stream which is represented by joining the group of Tony and Joe but she is not always welcomed because Rita is a decent girl and she does not like to be associated with Liza, she is happy in her small universe which consists of Tony. Rita is the only character out of these four who has some morality or work manliness, she stitches clothes in order to earn some money, she is like a docile wife without marriage who believes in words like faith, hope, love, respect, good, bad etc. Rita is the only character in this play that has a purpose in life and that is the love of

Tony, for the love of this unmanly-man she happily accepts the doomed temptation by Joe the devil. Describing these four characters Satya Paul says-

The four people represent cross sections of urban society lethargic, fervent, philosophical and sensible respectively..... They all get indulged in shallow love affairs to forget the frustration of their existence. (p. 204)

The whole story is knitted around the fall of Rita by the hands of Joe who is pure evil for Tony who is greedy enough to be any good; he wants nothing, desires nothing, does nothing but creates a tragedy out of a simple love story. *The Doldrums* “is a clever clever word coined by Currimbhoy” (Bowers p. 5) to signify the passivity of the life of these four youths who cannot be anchored because they don’t have enough air to move, by air here I mean spirit, none is willing to work, none is trying to get engaged, everyone is happy leading a purposeless and meaningless life. As Satya Paul says “they lead a low life which is worthless and meaningless reminding us of the life of existential anguish portrayed in the dramatic works of existential writers. (p.201) Life is absurd, so are the characters of this play, on one hand Tony loves Rita on the other hand he shares his love with Liza for some expensive gifts, Joe is also said to be Tony’s friend but he is too indifferent to be anyone’s friend at all, he is the most vicious of all Currimbhoy’s villains, he is an educated man, who does not want to conform himself according to the society he lives in, when Tony asks him to get one girlfriend he says- “it’s not fun having one” (p. 12), which is enough to clear his personality he seeks fun out of everything, whether it is singing, composing or his friendship with Tony; all are things of amusement to him, he does not feel for anyone, he is an emotionless man as absurd as his life. Although he is always seen singing and tuning with Tony but he is as indifferent as anything, he is way colder than a stone, as lifeless as a dead leaf. Joe understands that life is futile and enjoys this futility and absurdity, he is an alienated youth and runs from any human bondage or relationship. Joe lives in present, he is an immoral man who keeps an evil eye on his friend’s girlfriend, when the play starts he is introduced to the audience as -

sitting at the foot of the opposite tree, ogling Rita’s legs and thighs, is another small young man, with ratty intelligent eyes. This is Joe. (p. 10)

All the incidents of this play indicate the absence of God, and in the absence of any ‘le Seigneur’, where “each individual is responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely or ‘authentically’”. (Wikipedia) Although Rita is heard mentioning ‘God’ in her conversation, Joe takes up the position of God in her life and she acts according to his instructions afterwards. Tony devotes Joe and is dependent on him for every cognitive matter, all he seems to nod to what Joe says. Tony does not use his brain, he agrees to whatever Joe says and takes everything for granted, to support this claim I am quoting the lines spoken by Tony where he seems to defend the ways of Joe by looking at things differently, he says to Rita-

Do you know Rita? He is studying for his Ph.D.

He further adds-

Now who do you know who's studying for Ph.D.? Nobody. Till Joe here comes along. So what if he sees things upside-down. (p.140)

Tony becomes an anchorless canoe when Joe suddenly disappears from the scene and he believes he cannot live without him, and to substitute Joe he brings a drunkard into the house because he cannot bear the absence of Joe.

Joe is the most powerful character of this play, he is the one who decides the flow of the story, and he controls the actions of Tony and Rita and plays a crucial role in the development of the story. According to Tony, Joe is pursuing Ph.D, but he is not shown by the writer in any of the context, he is usually seen boozing with Tony, playing guitar, and composing idiotic, meaningless songs. Joe does not have any goal in life, neither he seems interested in anything other than the fall of Rita; all his dialogues are full of hatred towards men, women and the human race, he does not like Liza but wants to turn Rita into an immoral lady like Liza, we do not understand what he is up to, but slowly and gradually he gets what he wants and Rita accepts prostitution, but this is the point when Joe realizes the futility of his action and he disappears from the play, as Satya Paul suggests "his absence from the scene after his immoral act is a proof of his guilt (p.204). Joe who was always present in the scene is seen nowhere, his frustration is a definite result of his actions as Sartre claims-

"Man's freedom and his quest for authentic personal being meet with resistance and sometimes with frustration" (p.04)

That is what exactly happened with Joe, he was trying to create a world where he was the mentor, and guide of all but the subsequent outcome could not bring him peace all he could get was frustration. He understands that the absurdity of life is a constant element in our lives whether our hopes, designs, expectations are momentary ones, but absurdity lasts forever, whatever he did brought nothing to anyone's life, which is the final outcome, it reflects the meaninglessness of life and in frustration and anguish he succumbs to death and ends his life by drowning into the sea.

Alienation is a key concept in existentialism, all the four youths depicted by the writer are isolated in one or other way, at the core of their heart there is only silence and seclusion, they are indifferent towards each other as if they are not connected at all. Joe is always self esteeming and glorifying, he does not mind sleeping with his so called friend Tony's girlfriend, he even designs a plan for Rita's fall so that he can execute his evil tactics. Tony is all the more apathetic, he does not impede immoral actions of Rita, even when according to Joe's plan he encounters the fat and bald man he fails to react, he cannot do anything except standing still. Liza who is a professional prostitute always seems to try to enter the group of Tony, Rita and Joe, but she is never welcomed and her access is always denied. Rita is occupied with a false notion that she is not alone, she believes that she loves Tony and wants to stay with him forever, and just to keep him near, she accepts the malevolent offer of Joe. Rita was never a prime concern for Tony, he always wanted money and liked rich girls, expensive silk shirts and jeweled watches.

The Doldrummers is a complex story about human emotions and their crude choices that brought tragedy into their lives, life is shown as a upshot of our choices, if Rita could deny the offers of Joe, if Joe could work on his friendship with Tony, if Tony could be faithful to Rita, the story would have been different, but that is the unpredictability of life and beauty of the story that life depends over the choices human make “coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic, and there is always possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero”. (Sartre p. 43) Every character is trying to get something better but due to the bad choices they make the end is catastrophic, all through their lives they seem to be making an existence of their own but the absurdity of life does not allow them to create one and they end in nothingness and succumb themselves to the meaninglessness of life; in this connection I would conclude quoting Rita here where she reflects her idea about their situation in this absurd life “we three, like three blind mice, or better still, like the three monkeys, see nothing, hear nothing, do nothing” (p.50).

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